

THE SYNTAX OF ERROR

Perhaps the most vexing problem that teachers of basic writing face is the fact that the most serious errors that appear in student papers are those that we are the least equipped to handle, those that are in fact next to impossible to deal with by traditional methods. Unfortunately, the mistakes that students make are not always those clear-cut and predictable errors that are the most precisely described and categorized in the grammar books—errors of punctuation, spelling, agreement, tense, case, and so on. Important as these details are, they dwindle in significance next to problems of incoherence, illogicality, lack of conventional idiom or clear syntax—amorphous and unpredictable errors involving the structure of the whole sentence that are difficult to pinpoint, define, and analyze. The fact is that the most serious and the most intractable mistakes are those that do not fit into neat categories and defy analysis. Here are a few examples:

1. In regard to the Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with, it is of concern to all citizens.
2. The use of the pilgrimage was created to make the scene more realistic.
3. His concern for outward appearances is mainly to use it to convey the inner character.
4. Man has invented various types of poisons to kill insects; among the surviving insects, they have all become immune to these poisons.
5. By limiting the open enrollment program won't help to solve the problem.

A teacher who discovers a sentence of this type in a student's paper is hard put to know how to begin to deal with it. It is clear that the student has committed some sort of error. It is also clear that the error is a more serious, more fundamental mistake than the "classical" errors of verb agreement, punctuation, pronoun case,

Valerie Krishna is a specialist in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English alliterative poetry. She has been teaching at City College for five years.

and so on that are systematically set out in the grammar books. A conscientious teacher will recognize the gravity of the problem and will wish to deal with it before moving on to work on conventional errors of detail. However, it is not exactly clear just what the error is that has been committed. The sentence might be labeled "illogical" or "incoherent"; the writer might be said to have "shifted syntax" in mid-sentence. Grammar books caution against illogicality and incoherence, and some of them even give a name to this type of syntax shift—the "mixed construction"—but most offer little help in correcting any of these problems. They offer little help because gross structural errors of this type are not amenable to correction by the method that is used for errors of detail.

We eradicate errors of detail by concentrating on them. Grammar books isolate, define, categorize, and in general supply us with a great deal of information about them. We know, for example, exactly where an error involving verb agreement is likely to occur (in sentences in which the subject and the verb are separated by a prepositional phrase, the verb comes before the subject, or the subject is a collective noun, and so on). Thus an error such as this is comprehensible, predictable, and amenable to correction. We can anticipate such errors and try to head them off, either by having students do exercises that duplicate the kinds of sentences that we know are likely to give rise to such errors or by training students to be especially alert for verb agreement errors in these kinds of sentences when they proofread.

We have no such guidelines for errors such as the mixed construction and other errors involving problems of structure, coherence, and logic. For one thing, labels like "illogical" and "incoherent" and terms like "mixed construction" are vague: they do not isolate and define an error clearly. For another, there are so many different ways in which a writer can shift syntax in the middle of a sentence or "mix his constructions" that such errors simply cannot be categorized and predicated in precisely the way that errors of verb agreement can. Similarly, no one can possibly anticipate all of the different ways in which a piece of writing might be illogical or incoherent. Errors of verb agreement can almost be thought of as one error—or several very well understood variations on one error—that is committed over and over again. Every mixed construction, every incoherence, every illogicality seems to be a unique and original creation. Therefore, because grammar books cannot deal with them in the same way they deal with errors of detail, they lack information

on structural errors. Hence, the teacher despairs as he feels that such errors are random, unpredictable, and impossible to handle at the same time that he recognizes that they are the most serious problems than can appear in a student's papers.

The impossibility of classifying structural errors per se and of dealing with them in the traditional way forces us into another approach. Rather than concentrating on the errors themselves as finished products and attempting to define them as such, I believe that we can understand and deal with them best by understanding the type of approach to the sentence that stands behind such errors. That is, though I do not believe that structural errors in themselves can be categorized, I do believe that the sentences in which they appear can. Many of these structural errors are not the random aberrations that they seem to be, but instead are the direct outgrowth of what I call a *weak structural core* that is disjoined from the idea that a writer is trying to express. Students who are making structural errors, though they are committing mistakes that are unique and unclassifiable in themselves, are often following a stereotyped formula in constructing the sentences in which these mistakes appear. Such writers habitually "back into" their sentences, putting the heart of their idea into prepositional phrases, object noun clauses, adjectives, adverbs, or other ancillary parts of the sentence, wasting the subject and/or the verb position on indefinite, evasive expressions such as *it is*, *it appears*, *this seems to be the case*, or on other general, abstract, imprecise words (or omitting the subject or verb entirely), and finally joining the ancillary part of the sentence to the main clause awkwardly and illogically. This habitual wasting of the subject-verb position, along with the frantic struggle to fit a central thought into a peripheral expression and then to fit the expression to the main clause is the source of many, perhaps most, of the structural errors that appear in student papers, and, I believe, contributes to idiomatic, stylistic, and grammatical errors as well. The structural errors that are the most difficult to fit into a neat category and thus the most difficult to deal with are especially likely to occur in sentences that have this feeble structure: an anemic main clause too weak or indefinite to hold up modifiers and a clumsily attached, overburdened prepositional phrase into which the writer has attempted to cram the central idea of his sentence. The way to correct such mistakes, as well as to avoid them, is to strengthen the main clause, to move the central idea into the subject and/or the verb.

This common thread runs through the examples cited above, which

seem at first glance idiosyncratic and baffling. Let us look again at the first sentence.

In regard to the Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with, it is of concern to all citizens.

In this sentence, whatever the student wants to put forward as his central idea (and the teacher, of course, cannot be sure what it is) is very far from the core of the sentence—the subject and the verb—which is occupied by the vague expression *it is*. A teacher can help a student to rewrite this sentence by instructing him to move his central idea into the core of the sentence. Generally, if one asks the writer of such a sentence what the subject of the sentence is, he will answer “Watergate affair,” “recent problems” (or both), or “White House,” that is, he will name the *logical* subject of the sentence. The teacher can then point out that the logical subject is not in the position of grammatical subject, which is occupied by the uninformative word *it*. The teacher can then explain to the student that the logical subject and the grammatical subject ought to coincide and instruct the student to recompose the sentence, using the logical subject as the grammatical subject. I have found that, when students recompose sentences in this way, structural errors frequently disappear. For example, if the student decides that both “Watergate affair” and “recent problems” are his subject and moves them out of the prepositional phrase and into the position of subject, there is no longer any place for that indefinite *it* (which happens also to be a pronoun without a clear reference), which is messing up the structure of the sentence, and the student will have little difficulty in restructuring the whole sentence since the source of the problem has been removed (though he may run into a verb agreement problem because of the compound subject):

The Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with are [or is, as the case may be!] of concern to all citizens.

If the student is instructed to do the same thing with the verb that he has done with the subject, the sentence improves stylistically:

The Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with concern all citizens.

Similarly, the second sentence cited above is easy for a student to finish, once the student has moved whatever he considers his

logical subject into the position of grammatical subject, occupied in the original sentence by the vague word *use*:

The *pilgrimage* was created to make the scene more realistic.

or

The *writer* (or *Chaucer*) created the pilgrimage to make the scene more realistic.

The third sentence may be rewritten in several ways, depending again on what the student decides is his logical subject. The important point is that when a word that expresses his idea more precisely is moved into the position of subject, the rest of the sentence follows easily:

Outward appearances are used to convey inner character.

or

The author (or a proper name) uses outward appearances to convey inner character.

The fourth and fifth sentence seem at first glance to exemplify errors that are very different: one a faulty pronoun reference and the other a missing verb. However, in both cases, what appears to be the logical subject has been buried in a prepositional phrase and needs to be elevated to the position of grammatical subject:

Man has invented various types of poisons to kill insects; the surviving insects have all become immune to these poisons.

Limiting the open enrollment program won't help to solve the problem.

Idiomatic errors, also difficult for teachers to deal with, may also be eliminated when the main clause is strengthened. Many idiomatic errors involve prepositions, and these often appear in sentences in which the writer has similarly put his central thought into a prepositional phrase, rather than into the subject and verb, and then joined this phrase with the wrong preposition to the main clause. The following sentence is an example:

Everybody in the world tries to make money, but everybody thinks differently in using it.

When I questioned the student who wrote this sentence, she said that she had felt uneasy about the prepositional phrase but didn't know how to go about "fixing it." I asked her what action she wanted to talk about in the second part of the sentence, whether she really wished to say something about *thinking*. She replied that she had

actually wanted to say something about *using*, and then went on immediately to *but everybody uses it differently*, automatically eliminating the unidiomatic preposition.

Some conventional grammatical errors, such as dangling participles, can also be corrected by this method, as in the following example:

By paying directly, it is assured that we get better service.

Once a student substitutes a noun that expresses his thought more precisely than the indefinite *it*, the core of the sentence is strengthened, and the dangling participle disappears:

Paying directly assures us better service.

By paying directly we are assured better service.

We cannot help but wonder why students write in this way. Three possibilities suggest themselves to me.

1. It may simply be that students have a habit of attacking sentences in this roundabout way because they have the mistaken notion that simplicity and directness are the mark of the simple minded and are trying to "dress up" their writing. These introductory circumlocutions may appear impressive to them, and they may be using them to make their writing look profound. If so, this habit may be nothing more than a variation of the pompous, inflated writing affected by writers of all types (with the difference, of course, that basic writing students have a hard time pulling it off without making structural and grammatical errors).

2. Perhaps students write in this way to disguise the fact, from the reader and from themselves, that they are not thinking clearly or that they actually have nothing to say. It could be that, when ideas fail them, they take refuge in this construction simply as a means of filling up the page, hoping that the reader will not notice the difference. (There is a kind of wild logic in this process, because if one has nothing to say, it makes sense for the subject and the verb to be as nearly empty of meaning as possible.) Recently, for example, one of my students, in a paper entitled "New York City," after two detailed, interesting, coherent, and elegant paragraphs on Manhattan and Brooklyn, began his third paragraph with the startling sentence

In the Bronx and Queens it's more of a suburban type living.

When I called the student's attention to the way in which his style had suddenly deteriorated, he confessed that he had had problems

writing this paragraph, that he really had nothing to say about the Bronx and Queens, since there is "nothing there," and wrote the paragraph only because he felt he had to "to balance out the paper."

3. A third possibility is that students write in this way because they find writing painful and words treacherous and are trying to tread as lightly as possible in the world of the written word in order not to make fools of themselves. If this is so, then attacking errors indirectly through sentence structure in the way described here, rather than directly through teaching students everything we know about errors and daily painting a bleaker and bleaker picture of all the possible ways their writing might go wrong, might be even more important than I have so far suggested. Teaching students what *to do*, if it could be worked out as completely and systematically as has our traditional method of teaching them what *not* to do, how to construct a sentence rather than how not to, may be the only kind of craftsmanship that we can present without inhibiting our students so much that we drive them into the very errors that we are trying to teach them to avoid.